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Honduran Island Used as CIA Base for Contras

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras—A remote Honduran island in the Caribbean off Honduras has reportedly become the main depot for a CIA-run military operation supplying rebels fighting to oust the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

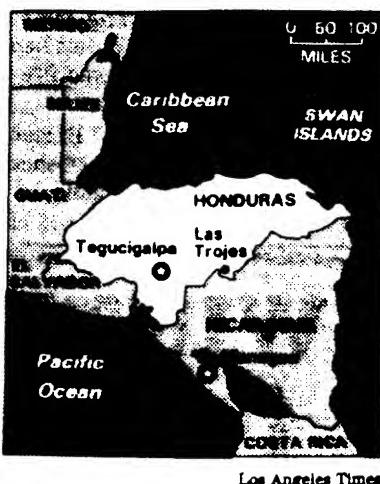
Rebel sources and military observers, who asked that they not be further identified, said Americans are overseeing rebel supply operations on one of the Swan Islands, once a support base for the abortive CIA-backed invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs.

They said that since October, when President Reagan signed legislation authorizing \$100 million in military and other aid to the rebels, U.S.-bought weapons and military supplies have been delivered regularly to the larger of the Swan Islands, which are two specks of limestone owned by Honduras and lying about 110 miles north of the Honduran coast.

The sources said that other pieces of the U.S. aid program are also in place:

—At least two American intelligence agents are based at the rebels' headquarters, at Yamales in southern Honduras.

—A second group of rebels, nearly 140 men, has arrived in the United States for military training. The first group, about 125 rebels, completed a six-week course last



month at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida.

Since December, U.S. and rebel sources said, the newly equipped insurgent forces, or *contras*, have been infiltrating into Nicaragua in small groups from their bases in Honduras. Contra civilian leader Adolfo Calero says that 10,000 contras are inside Nicaragua. According to Pentagon officials, 7,000 have infiltrated, but Nicaraguan and diplomatic sources say the number is much lower.

The Swan Islands site is said to have been selected for the supply operation because of the Honduran government's desire to keep contra activities out of public view, in order to avoid domestic controversy and to head off diplomatic

complaints from Nicaragua. The Sandinista government of Nicaragua has filed suit against Honduras in the World Court for allowing the contras to operate from Honduran territory.

"The Hondurans want a lower profile," one source here said. "They want this out of the lime-light."

Also, the Swan Islands were considered safe from any possible attack.

The sparsely inhabited larger island, two miles long, served as a CIA-run radio operation center for anti-Castro rebels during their attack on the Bay of Pigs in 1961. At

that time, Nicaragua served as an air base for the right-wing Cuban rebels.

Sources said that last month one of the CIA-contracted supply planes operating out of the islands crashed in the sea and sank. They said the plane was of Spanish manufacture, with twin turbo engines, and that it had a mechanical failure. They said it carried no cargo at the time. One source said the crew was made up of Americans, and that none were injured.

An average of two supply flights a week have been arriving at the Swan Islands site, along with some shipments by sea, the sources said. They said there is a 6,000-foot grass airstrip and a couple of recently built warehouses.

From the island, they said, the supplies are ferried to Aguacate, a Honduran air base long used by the contras, and Palmerola, headquarters of the U.S.-Honduras joint task force Bravo. A rebel source said that contra pilots air-drop the supplies to their men in Nicaragua.

"The goal," one source said, "is to eventually be able to run [from the island] right into Nicaragua."

The shipments, the sources say, have included uniforms and other equipment for 10,000 men, 3,000 shoulder-fired light anti-tank weapons, several thousand M-79 grenade launchers and about 35 Soviet-made SAM-7 portable ground-to-air missiles.

"The troops are OK now," a contra leader said. "They are a lot better off than before."

One rebel source said the contras expect to receive about 100 U.S.-made Red Eye missiles. This is a weapon similar to the SAM-7.

"When you receive U.S. money," he said in reference to the U.S. weapons, "it's fair you buy their product."

The sources here said that on Jan. 4, about 140 contras began the second six-week training course offered by U.S. Special Forces under the military aid package.

Most of the trainees are members of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the largest armed rebel group. Its military leader is Enrique Bermudez and its civilian leader is Calero.

An FDN source complained that the U.S. trainers had tried to "brainwash" contra commanders into leaving the FDN and joining the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO), a contra umbrella group.

"They kept saying that UNO is best, that the FDN should disappear," the source said bitterly.

UNO, formed under pressure from U.S. officials, is run by Calero and the more politically moderate Alfonso Robelo and Arturo Cruz.

The FDN's military leader, Bermudez, was a colonel in the Nicaraguan National Guard under the dictator Anastasio Somoza, who was ousted by the Marxist-led Sandinistas in 1979. Bermudez has been a controversial figure, considered too right-wing by some contras and ineffective by some. U.S. officials have been trying to increase the power of Cruz and Robelo within UNO, but the two represent few armed contras.

The FDN source said the trainers were "anti-nationalistic." They

compared the pressure to a successful CIA effort last year to persuade Costa Rica-based rebel commanders to abandon their leader, Eden Pastora, and join UNO. They reportedly were assured of receiving arms and supplies in exchange for leaving Pastora.

"The FDN commanders protested," one source said. "They said they have been in the FDN for five years and they agreed to participate in the UNO alliance as long as their right to keep their own movement was respected."

Pilot, Paratroop Training

The training reportedly includes instruction in leadership, demolition, the use of mortars and artillery, ambush tactics and first aid. Some contras, the sources said, will soon be trained as pilots and paratroopers, either in Honduras or the United States.

Contra leaders and other sources say the insurgents have been infiltrating into Nicaragua from areas east of the Honduran salient where the contra headquarters is situated.

"Their strategy previously was based on massive infiltrations, from 1,000 to 2,000 people," a political analyst said. "But since last October the Sandinistas have shown that is not possible. The Sandinistas put 14,000 to 16,000 troops along the border."

In October, the contras and Sandinistas engaged in conventional combat in Honduras that resulted in hundreds of casualties on both sides. In December, the Sandinistas

again attacked the contras in Honduras, and the Honduran air force retaliated by bombing targets in northern Nicaragua.

"The contras are now in the stage of penetrating Nicaragua in small units, something they should have done a long time ago," the analyst said.

"The next stage is to be able to stay in Nicaragua and stay alive. The only way they are going to do that is if they change their attitude and instead of seeing a Sandinista in every farmer, see a potential anti-Sandinista."

This month the contras began a propaganda campaign known as Radio Liberacion, with a 50,000-watt transmitter in El Salvador. The broadcast, heard nightly, is still in the test stage.

"By March, the situation is going to be very difficult for the Sandinistas," a rebel leader said.

According to a rebel source, "two or three" U.S. intelligence agents are based at the Yamales camp in Honduras, about 12 miles east of Las Trojes and 12 miles from the Nicaraguan border. He declined to say specifically what the Americans are doing.

The legislation providing the \$100 million in aid prohibits U.S. officials from furnishing "any training or other service" within 20 miles of the border, but it apparently does not prohibit U.S. intelligence gathering.

"The U.S. Embassy scrupulously respects this and all other legislation," an embassy spokesman said.